

# READING COMPREHENSION

It is perhaps not always realised that being educated in a large measure implies a capacity for acquiring new understanding through reading and integrating it with the knowledge already acquired. This process is what we broadly call comprehension. On a more technical level, comprehension involves a wide range of skills and interests. As a truly multi-dimensional affair, it encompasses a variety of abilities with respect to vocabulary, grammatical and discoursal features, inferential processes and contextual knowledge. According to Carroll, some of the factors operating in comprehending a text are: remembering word meanings; following the structure of a passage; finding answers to questions answered explicitly or in paraphrase; recognising a writer's purpose, attitude, tone and mood; and drawing inferences from the context. This last factor needs special notice since even the meaning of a word or a phrase in a stretch of discourse may depend upon what has preceded it (textual or linguistic context), and on the presuppositions as well as personal and cultural considerations, relating to the writer (extra-textual or extra-linguistic context).

For proper comprehension it is also necessary to know what Wayne C. Booth has called 'Rhetorical Stance':

The common ingredient that I find in all of the writing I admire... is something that I shall reluctantly call the rhetorical stance, a stance which depends on discovering and maintaining in any writing situation a proper balance among the three elements that are at work in any communicative effort: the available arguments about the subject itself, the interest and peculiarities of the audience and the voice, the implied character of the speaker.

The Rhetorical Stance  
*College Composition and Communication*

It needs sustained training to be able to understand this 'Rhetorical Stance.' It should, however, not be forgotten that there is a more basic

skill in the absence of which the above stance would be incomprehensible. It lies in the ability to know the writer's purpose which may be all kinds of things – to clarify, to criticise, to defend, to promote, to warn, etc.

A parallel requirement is the clear perception of a writer's style – the distinctively original and personal way in which a writer expresses himself and thus establishes his unique identity. It is not very different from our recognition of a friend's identity by hearing his voice on the telephone. Yet another requirement calls for a clear awareness of the tone of what one reads. It is the writer's attitude towards his subject, his reader, or both. As in the case of style, tone in writing is also like the tone of voice in speaking and it also performs the same function – expressing anger, indignation, gentle or exalted feeling, respect, defiance, praise or indifference. All this and much more is achieved through the manipulation of language which includes choice of words, peculiarities of usage and structure and the use of images, figures of speech, rhythm and even punctuation.

Reading is important not merely because it gives access to new knowledge. Being an active process requiring effort, concentration and deliberation, it is an aid to thinking. Not only this, anyone seriously interested in improving his writing cannot ignore good and extensive reading. The reason is not far to seek. Both reading and writing, as indeed also thinking, involve similar problems of organisation, development, logic and expression (the last named quality being not involved in thinking).

Prose discourse usually takes on four forms: narration, description, exposition and argumentation. Each form serves a distinct purpose. Narration tells a story by recounting an incident or event. Description 'paints' pictures in words of an object, a person, a place, a state or a process. Exposition seeks to inform, set forth, explain or clarify. Argumentation is concerned with matters involving differences of opinion and it seeks to persuade, for or against, a certain point of view.

Just as all writing has a discernible purpose behind it, so also it has a well-defined structure. Ordering, arranging, organising, developing the material in hand according to recognised principles, result in patterns of structure which lend formal unity, grammatical cohesion and semantic coherence to the composition.

The search for structure can be at the paragraph level or at a higher-than-paragraph unit level (intra-vs. inter-paragraph structure). Within the paragraph, sentences should flow smoothly, one into the other. One of the common devices for achieving

words or phrases such as *next, besides, then, however, thus, consequently, indeed, in addition, therefore, moreover, nonetheless, on the contrary, as a result, on the other hand, furthermore*. Some of these can also be used for connecting paragraphs. Or, such phrases and clauses as *for example, in conclusion, to sum up, we now see that, at last*, can be used as inter-paragraph transitional devices.

Each paragraph is built around a key idea contained in or expressed by what is usually called a topic sentence. All other sentences in the paragraph generally support the topic sentence. Thought development within a paragraph follows certain recognisable patterns. Prominent among these are *example, time arrangement, space arrangement, general and specific, statistics, comparison and/or contrast, division or classification, cause and effect and analogy*.

Recent thinking about discourse analysis has led to a meaningful distinction between a sentence and an utterance. The former is a grammatical unit, the latter a communicative unit. There is no one-to-one correspondence between the grammatical status of a sentence and its communicative or utterance value. Thus, both 'Have a seat and I'll get you a drink' and 'Move an inch and I'll knock your teeth in' are imperatives but the communicative function of the former is giving a suggestion, while that of the latter is holding out a threat. Intelligent reading requires an awareness of the intonation that links a sentence function with its utterance value.

Another useful aid to a good reader is to make him aware of two aspects of connected writing. Sentences combine to form texts and the relations between sentences are aspects of grammatical cohesion. On the other hand, utterances combine to form discourse and the relations between them are aspects of discoursal coherence. Thus, both the following examples are coherent as discourse, but only the first one is a cohesive text, with the second sentence linked to the first by ellipsis.

- A: Can you go to Bombay tomorrow?
- B: Yes, I can.
- A: Can you go to Bombay tomorrow?
- B: Indian Airlines pilots are on strike.

Another way of looking at the problem of comprehension is to treat it on the basis of the dichotomy between what is called pure or simple comprehension, on the one hand, and inferential and implicational comprehension, on the other. The former requires a mere understanding of the words in their normal syntax, the latter, besides a literal comprehension of the text, "an apprehension of the total situation described"

done by his pupils, and you will certainly find that the careless or inattentive pupil is liable to be punished.

1. In what way was learning associated with fear?
2. What were the peculiarities of the system which encouraged competition among pupils?
3. What did the nineteenth century belief in learning for its own sake result in?
4. Discuss the three stages through which the methods of making pupils learn developed?
5. Which methods are practised in the modern classroom?

Since most major examinations contain multiple-choice questions on passages for comprehension, we give below a number of them for your practice. The first one has been properly discussed.

1. We in India have our own special problems. No one can deny that some of them are of a serious nature and must be attacked with *vigour* and determination. Our national objectives have been defined clearly. We aim at providing every citizen with the basic necessities and complete freedom to lead a life of his or her own choice. We aim to create a democratic society, strong and free, in which every citizen, irrespective of his religious beliefs, will occupy an equal and honoured place, and be given full and equal opportunities for growth and service. We aim at ending untouchability and doing away with the present inequalities of status and wealth. We are opposed to the concentration of wealth in a few hands.
  1. This passage could most probably be a part of
    - (a) The Indian Constitution
    - (b) A book on political science
    - (c) A speech
    - (d) A personal letter
  2. According to the author, our national objective is to
    - (a) create equal opportunities for all
    - (b) end economic exploitation in the country
    - (c) promote individual freedom and prosperity
    - (d) promote democracy, socialism and secularism
  3. Pick out the wrong statement:
    - (a) The problems of Indians are like anyone else's
    - (b) Some of our problems can be handled only by strong people

- (c) Our goal is to build an India free from economic exploitation
  - (d) There is no uncertainty about our national objectives
4. The italicised word *vigour* means
- (a) force
  - (b) enthusiasm
  - (c) physical health
  - (d) forcefulness of language

The first item requires you to ‘place’ the given passage, i.e., to find where, out of the four ‘places’ given, it is most likely to occur. Those who are familiar with the Indian Constitution may find the use of ‘we’ in the passage a distractor. The content of the passage and much of its vocabulary may mislead the candidates into choosing (b), which therefore, can again act as a distractor. Misreading the tone of the passage, because of the use of the first person pronoun, may distract the reader to choose (d). One strong reason to choose (c) as the key, apart from the overall tone of the passage, is the repetition of ‘we’ throughout the passage. Even the parallel constructions repeated in the passage give it a rhetorical complexion which belongs more to speech than to writing. One has, therefore, to have the ability both to eliminate (for negative reasons) the wrong response and to identify (for positive reasons) the right response.

In item two, the principle governing the right option (key) is that, whereas the whole can represent the parts, the parts individually and separately cannot represent the whole. Thus, while each one of (a), (b) and (c) is not wholly wrong, none of them is fully right. And since (d) is fully right, (a), (b) and (c) are distractors in relation to (d), which is the best response.

Item three is slightly different. It asks you to identify the wrong statement, which implies that three out of the four options are true while only one is false. Option (b) is true because of the sentence ‘No one can ... vigour determination’. Similarly, (c) is true as the last two sentences imply the end of economic exploitation. Again (d) is true because of the sentence ‘Our national ... defined clearly’. Thus we are left with option (a). Though it must be wrong by the above process of elimination, we must double-check it and see whether it is indeed wrong. The very first sentence falsifies it, for it says: ‘We in India have our own special problems’, which implies that our problems are not like those of others. So (a) is the key.

The last one is a vocabulary item. It merely wants you to identify the meaning of the italicised word in the context in which it is used. In

it (d) is a real distractor because in some cases vigour does mean 'forcefulness of language'. Moreover, it is somewhat close to (a). In a different sense (c) becomes a strong distractor, for vigour is most frequently associated with physical strength. The combination of 'vigour and determination' may mislead some to think that vigour means enthusiasm. Obviously (a) is the key here.

You have thus seen that in a multiple-choice item different reasoning strategies have to be employed in order to eliminate the distractors and arrive at the key.

## II. Dear Children,

I like being with children and talking to them and, even more, playing with them. For a moment I forget that I am terribly old and that it is a very long time ago since I was a child. But when I sit down to write to you, I cannot forget my age and the distance that separates you from me. Old people have a habit of delivering sermons and good advice to the young. I remember that I disliked this very much long, long ago when I was a boy. So I suppose you do not like it very much either.

What, then, shall I write about? If you were with me, I would love to talk to you about this beautiful world of ours, about flowers and trees and birds and animals, and stars and mountains and glaciers and all other wonderful things that surround us in the world. We have all this beauty all round us and yet we who are grownups, often forget about it and lose ourselves in our arguments or our quarrels. We sit in our offices and imagine that we are doing very important work.

Our country is a very big country and there is a great deal to be done by all of us. If each one of us does his or her little bit, then all this mounts up and the country prospers and goes ahead fast.

I have tried to talk to you in this letter, as if you were sitting near me, and I have written more than I intended.

JAWAHARLAL

(Abridged from a letter written by Jawaharlal Nehru for *Shankar's Weekly Children's Number*)

1. "I like being with children and talking to them and, even more, playing with them."

The above sentence implies that

- (a) Jawaharlal liked nothing better than playing with children.
  - (b) If Jawaharlal got an opportunity to play with children he did not talk to them.
  - (c) Jawaharlal liked all the three things: being with children, talking to them, and playing with them. Of these, he liked the last thing most
  - (d) Whenever Jawaharlal met children, he first played with them and only afterwards talked to them.
2. "If each one of us does his or her little bit, then all *this* mounts up and the country prospers and goes ahead fast."
- In the above sentence *this* refers to:
- (a) our country
  - (b) the fact that our country is big
  - (c) the little bit that each one of us does
  - (d) the fact that there is a great deal to be done by all of us
3. "For a moment I forgot that I am *terribly* old and that it is a very long time ago since I was a child".
- Here *terribly* means
- (a) that Jawaharlal is afraid of old age
  - (b) extremely
  - (c) that he wants to frighten children by his age
  - (d) that old age is a terrifying experience
4. "Old people have a habit of delivering *sermons* and good advice to the young."

Here the word *sermons* means

- (a) long speeches
  - (b) moral fault-finding or warnings
  - (c) religious addresses in a church
  - (d) quotations from a religious text
5. The word *glaciers* in the second sentence of the second paragraph of the letter means
- (a) snow-covered peaks
  - (b) masses of ice, formed by snow on mountains, moving slowly along a valley
  - (c) valleys
  - (d) formations of clouds in the sky

III. From the very beginning man has attempted what has